

Ollife's Pharmacy, 6 Bowery,
New York City.
New York Co

HABS No. 4-17

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

OLLIFFE'S PHARMACY
No. 6 Bowery, New York City.

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Location, Date and History

The business now bearing the name of Wm. M. Olliffe, Inc., conducted at No. 6 Bowery, three doors north of Deyers Street, was founded in 1805. "The building in which it does business was erected in the eighteenth century" is the indefinite and probably incorrect statement in The Druggists Circular, July, 1927, p. 666, entitled "Is this America's Oldest Drug Store?" The question is in no wise answered in that article, but is fitting, nevertheless. Although founded in 1805, as averred by the present owners, there have been changes since 1805 in the ownership of the business and a slight shift in the location of the place of business. As for the age of this building compared with other old drug stores in this country -- that has been the subject of a special inquiry made by a writer quoted below, who finds neither the ownership of the business nor the building is as old as claimed by the proprietor's sign, conspicuously displayed in the window, which reads, "This is the oldest drug-store in the United States." The unique distinction of being the oldest drug store in the United States and "still doing business at the old stand" is held by the pharmacy of Simon Rau and Co., 420 Main Street., Bethlehem, Pa. There are several others older than Olliffe's Pharmacy. (See Historical Sketches of Old Drug Stores in this Country, by Otto Raubenheimer, in The Druggists Circular, Oct. 1927, pp. 998-991.)


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Through the able researches of Otto Raubenheimer, Ph.M., a volunteer and critical historian of American pharmacy, published in The Druggists Circular, Nov. 1927, p. 1093, under the title, "Druggists and their Stores in New York Over a Century Ago," the following facts have been gathered regarding this pharmacy: "1805 -- Olliffe's Drug Store, 6 Bowery, was established by Dr. Daniel D. Walters at 210 Chatham Street (now Park Row), corner of Doyers. In 1828 his business was moved to its present location.

"The following year, Dr. Constantine Adamson, who had been managing the store for the Walters Estate, bought it. (See American Pharmacist, 1882, p. 336.) According to an article by Harry Vin Army [entitled] "Pharmaceutical New York in 1821", published in the Journal of the Amer. Pharmaceutical Assn., 1921, p. 861, 'Constantine Adamson in the New York Directory of 1821 is listed as teacher, but his obituary states that from 1818 to 1829 he conducted the store of Waters [Walters?] and Seaman.' However, the 1821 directory also lists C. Adamson, druggist, Rivington and Ludlow Streets. Constantine Adamson was president of New York College of Pharmacy from 1835 to 1846. Through him the pharmacy at 6 Bowery obtained a wide reputation as a prescription store.

"In 1847 William J. Olliffe became a partner. In 1856, upon the death of C. Adamson, Mr. Olliffe became the sole owner. In 1865 Mr. Olliffe died. His obituary appears in the Proceedings of the American Pharmaceutical Assn. for 1866, page 21. From 1865 to 1890 the son, Wm. M. Olliffe, owned the business and upon his death it was continued



by his estate.

"Joseph Schenck, now [1927] head of the United Artists Motion Picture Company, and the husband of Norma Talmadge, at one time was drug clerk at Olliffe's and his friend Irving Berlin, then a Bowery song-and-dance-man, was a frequent visitor there. In 1927, Frances B. Campbell, the niece of Mrs. Wm. M. Olliffe, became the owner of the store."


Architectural Description

Situated on the west side of the Bowery, a few doors below Pell Street, this two story frame building has a front of matched boarding above the show-windows. As nearly as we can approximate the date, it appears to be of the period around 1812.

Its position on the lot is unusual, for it seems to have been built with side walls so located that when a section of them was removed the party walls were found to be extending over the adjoining lots. This overstepping the bounds is also observed on the front of the building at the right and where the leader is tied to the adjoining building's gutter.

Judging by the slope of the roof and the position of the stairway, the rear or west section of the building was of later construction. This extension is a one-story addition with skylight to light the interior at the west end of the store.

The front (now considerably covered with weather-beaten wooden signs) is in very good proportions --- an excellent specimen of Colonial or early Federal store architecture. It resembles that of the little old shops of London.



The entire front, including the frames of the old show-
windows, is original. Old iron posts, flanking the entrance
about six feet apart to support the upper structure, are
also original. In the extreme rear wall is another iron post
enclosed in a wooden box to support the single girder running
north and south. The floor joists run east and west.

The glass-pannelled double entrance doors are the
originals, the left door being kept fastened.

The depth of the interior of the store is about 36
feet 3 inches. The five north and south girders that carry
the ceiling of the first floor (and the floor of the
second) are about 20 feet in length. The interior width of
the store is 17 feet 4 inches inside the frames of the
wall cabinets.

The counters are the old original counters -- two sales
counters on either side, and one across the rear which is
used as a prescription counter. They were first painted
white, but (so it is said) the soot from the old Elevated
Railroad trains before the line was made electric compelled
repainting them black. The architectural details of these
counters are distinctly Gothic and unusually heavy. They are
shown in the accompanying drawings.

There is an extraordinary variety in the size and shape
of the drawers placed against the walls back of the sales
counters on both sides of the store. These too are shown
in the drawings.

Modern electric lights hang from the ceiling, but it
is not necessary to keep these lighted at all times even




for the work of the prescription clerk. Gas is used for heating.

The store windows in front have the usual old framing standing out from the window jamb, and almost completely exposed. The window box is a wide wooden band inside the window opening, as contrasted with the "staff bead" or "weather bead" usually employed at present in modern frame window construction. The old wrought-iron brackets holding the big glass jars of water or other liquid chemically colored for window display -- the ancient drug-store emblem -- are the original brackets. (From the field notes of J. Franklin Hunt, architect of the present survey.)

General Observations

Some general observations concerning the appearance -- the local color -- that clings to this store are always made by new visitors, and of course these serve as a good business advertisement for the place. There is an opportunity for some over-zealous employee of the place to try to play upon the credulity of visitors. One pointed out that when Washington was in New York, he lived only five blocks away in Cherry Street, and might have visited the store. He evidently did not know that Washington died in 1799 and was last in New York ten years before that.

This employee was asked how he knew that this is the "oldest drug store in the United States." He explained that by that statement (appearing on the sign in the window) was meant that the business was continued in one location



and under the same family management longer than any other; and when reminded that there were many other old drug-stores, he said that until the statement was successfully contradicted the sign would remain. That contradiction is placed near the beginning of this review, supported by the testimony of a special investigator.

Nevertheless, the place is interesting for the age it has. Inside, the store seems surprisingly large. One views rows of walnut-stained cabinets, marble-topped counters, and glass show-cases. There are also cabinets, more modern in appearance, against the rear partition, in front of which the prescription men work.

The partition divides the original store from the addition that was built in 1860 and contains the laboratory and owner's office. This office is a little "cubby-hole" on the left; the walls of which are covered with books. Prescription books dating back to 1830, and out-of-date medical text books are conspicuous in the collection.

It is in the two upper stories that the visitor comes to a full realization of the age of the building. The floors are sagging at the center to a depth of perhaps 6 or 7 inches. The rooms here were once occupied by apprentices. Laid by and forgotten are dust-covered prescription books, bottles, boxes, and pestles. That part of the store seems a fit place to draw a circle, burn a pinch of sulphur, and summon a conference of ancient pharmacists wearing long beards and spectacles. One is reminded of the picture Shakespeare gives



us in "Romeo and Juliette" of an Italian apothecary shop
of the sixteenth-century:

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In his needy shop a tortoise hung,
An alligator stuff'd, and other skins
Of ill shap'd fishes; and about his shelves
A beggarly account of empty boxes,
Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds,
Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses,
Were thinly scattered to make up a show.

Olliffe's Pharmacy is around the corner from "Chinatown."
Chinese signs are included among those in the window. A
handsome, intelligent, smiling Chinese drug clerk is behind
the prescription counter. Chinese customers come with pre-
scriptions written, no doubt, in the Chinese language.

All this aids the impression of the ancient odd the
weird; but when one examines the stock of new goods in the
show cases one sees the modern trend in the evolution of the
American drug store which proves that this place is
thoroughly up to date.

Written, May 31, 1934, by

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

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118 Pine Street,
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Approved:

Wm. Dewey Felt

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Reviewed 1936. H.C.F.